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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000173

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SUBJECT: BASRAH'S PRO-WESTERN SUNNI CLERIC ON SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

REF: BASRAH 139

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CLASSIFIED BY: Andrea F. Gastaldo, Acting Regional Coordinator,
REO Basrah, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On November 27 Acting Regional Coordinator met with Shaykh Khaled Al Mulla, a prominent Sunni cleric whose pro-Western stance has made him the target of Al Qa'eda in Iraq (AQI). Shaykh Khaled told the ARC that he blames Iraq's security problems squarely on AQI elements and their destruction will lead to the militias being dismantled since they will have no enemy to face. Commenting on the recent sectarian violence in Baghdad, Shaykh Khaled stated that he and his fellow Sunni clerics in Basrah forbade retaliatory attacks on Shi'a for violence elsewhere. Proffering a solution to some of the region's Al-Qa'eda's concerns, the Shaykh suggested that the U.S. support discussion between moderate Iraqi Sunni clerics and Sunnis around the Gulf region who have a young population easily influenced by extremist rhetoric in order to counter it. END SUMMARY.

Sectarian Violence and Al-Qa'eda

12. (C) Acting Regional Coordinator met with Sunni cleric Shaykh Khaled Al Mulla on November 27 to ask his opinion on the recent sectarian violence in Baghdad and possible spillover effects in Basrah. Shaykh Khaled, a moderate cleric who is strongly pro-western, made it clear that the violence was reprehensible but that Al Qa'eda elements were to blame. Shaykh Khaled stressed his belief that Sunni politicians who did not raise the spectre of AQI were also complicit. Without naming anyone, the Shaykh went on to say that "many of our (Sunni) leadership know them (AQI), house them, and give them safehaven." While acknowledging that all violence is of concern, Shaykh Khaled asserted that the incidents of sectarian violence in Basrah were one half of one percent of those in the central Iraq areas including Al Baquba. He added that they (the Sunnis) have had enough, starting with Saddam's violence, the violence of this war, and now the sectarian violence.

13. (C) Shaykh Khaled informed the ARC that he and other Sunni clerics in Basrah had made a point in last Friday's sermons, the day after the Sadr City bombs, to forbid Sunnis from conducting retaliatory acts in revenge for what had happened in Baghdad. Shaykh Khaled stated that he believed Sunnis in Basrah would not lash out at the Shi'a since, if they did, "there would be none standing", alluding to the fact that Sunnis are a clear minority in Iraq's second largest city. (Note. Shaykh Khaled stated that

there were "200,000 Sunni families" in Basrah, a figure too high for a city of 2.5 million people. It is more likely that there are 200,000 Sunnis total in a city overwhelmingly Shi'a. End note.)

Moderating Others

14. (C) The Shaykh, who will be attending an IVP program in Washington in January 2007, offered a possible solution to what he sees as the growing threat of Al Qa'eda in the region. He advised that the U.S. should support moderate Sunni clerics when they speak out on AQI and focus the attention on what the moderates are saying rather than what "extremist" Sunni clerics such as Harith Al-Dari say when they issue fatwas for violence against Coalition Forces in Iraq. Shaykh Khaled believes that if moderate Iraqi Sunni clerics were given a program of travel to speak out in neighboring Sunni majority countries about what is going on in Iraq and the impact of the AQI originating violence, that they could have a countering effect to the extremist rhetoric which is being used to recruit Sunni youths to go into Iraq. He specifically asked if it was possible for the REO to assist getting a regional program together for himself as well as for other moderate clerics who share his views to speak to others in the Gulf. Pointing to Saudi Arabia as the origin of Sunni extremism, he said that he would prefer to go to Kuwait, UAE, and other GCC countries first since he believed he could have a greater impact there. (Note: Shaykh Khaled acknowledged that he has a reputation within Saudi Arabia which makes him less than welcome there. He told the ARC that he was not invited to the October conference in Mecca on Reconciliation for Iraqi Clerics specifically because he would raise Al Qa'eda as the root reason for the violence and that was something most of the attendees would not address. He said that he considered the conference and resulting declaration a "slap in the face to truth" since it did not speak to Al Qa'eda's role in the bloodshed. End note.)

15. (C) Comment. Shaykh Al Mulla's suggestion of a speaking

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tour of Iraqi moderate clerics within the Gulf has merit and should be explored. Neighboring countries that have seen an increase in extremism in the past few years could conceivably use the Shaykh and others like him to offset the stories which have filtered out of Iraq by foreign fighters looking to recruit more bodies. Since the insurgency has not decreased significantly, Iraqi speakers with ground experience in the violence could help show the other side of the coin, Iraqis who are still interested in bettering their country but who also feel strongly that the way to do it is with the U.S. and Coalition assistance. End comment.
GASTALDO